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VII.—THE DETECTION OF PERSONALITY IN LITERATURE.

Most literary productions are definitely accepted as the work of certain men, whose personality is associated with, and in a measure fixed by, their writings. Cases are not uncommon, however, in which the originality of a book is dubious, or its authorship uncertain ; and students of literature are then called upon to decide whether a work, or a passage in a work, is the product of one man's brain, or of another's. In other words, they must determine the personality back of the written words.

The problem is ultimately psychological. It will be admitted by all, I suppose, as almost impossible that two independent writers, with all their inevitable differences in temperament and education, should look at a subject from exactly the same point of view, and then express their idea in exactly the same wording. A coincidence in idea alone would be unusual enough, and identical terms in addition, hardly short of miraculous. But in practice the difficulty of identifying a writer's touch wherever it may appear is often insurmountable. There are some attributes of existence in which all men are interested,—love, death, deceit, loyalty ; and each writer cannot coin new words to represent those facts. Whenever the author's individuality does not amount to mannerism, there must often be an approximation of utterance which defies the critic's power of discrimination. To settle such questions would require that the critic penetrate the spirit of his subjects until he can put himself in their places, can substitute their thoughts for his own ; a feat hard enough to accomplish with respect to living persons, whom we meet every day ; and far more difficult

with a dead name, whose personality is transmitted to us very likely chiefly through literary remains, which may show only one side of the man's real nature. And the critic's own bias may be such as to warp all his decisions.

These considerations will become more clear in concrete examples. Disputes concerning personality fall naturally into two general divisions: first, plagiarism versus originality, that is, an author's claim to priority of invention in some phrase, idea or plot which he has used, and second, the less common but more weighty cases where the real author of some play, or novel, or essay is unknown, and the claims of several men are upheld by as many critics.

PART ONE.

The first division, which covers the subject of interinfluence between writers, may be split into its component sections as follows: (1), similar literary form, specifically, verse form; (2), similar word or phrase; (3), similar subject or plot; and (4), similar mode of thought. I wish to consider these cases in order, trying to determine what relative value one can assign to each as proof of plagiarism or lack of originality.

1. The simplest kind of reliance upon the work of another involves neither words nor ideas, but only external form, the mould in which the words are run. Such moulds may easily be traced in their passage from the hands of one to another, but they are more likely to be the product of a period than of an individual. Prose forms are in general more loose and less characteristic than poetic ones, although one can perceive in the vogue of the essay, the three-volume novel, and the short story, guiding influences which have bent the natural tendency of writers. In poetry the exterior is more distinct in outline, and is reduced to fixed combinations of rime and

metre, which afford such possibility of variety that one may well accept identity as proving connection. The sonnet is a name for a certain very definite order of rimes, and when the poets of France, Spain and England adopted that form they were confessedly relying on an Italian invention for part of their labor. No one thought the worse of them, for they were not in that depth of degenerate ingenuity to which the Provençals descended, by whom a novel scheme of rime or metre was considered requisite for an original poem. The skill with which a form is used is our test of ability and the merit of the invention,—which may be very great,—must be scattered over a nation. It would be hard, I imagine, to fix upon any one man the credit for the sonnet, the rondeau, the ballade, or any other accepted poetic form, though their dominance may sometimes be established by the brilliant handling of a single master.

I said that resemblance of poetic forms is as reliable a proof as exists of the communication of methods from one to another. Yet even here there may be some coincidences due to pure chance. A stanza of the 10-line type of *ballade*, as used by Villon in the *Prayer to the Virgin* and elsewhere, has an arrangement of rimes almost identical with that of the Spanish popular form called the *décima*, but I do not know that anyone ever suggested a connection between them.¹ According to the theory generally accepted at present, however unreasonable it may seem to some, the poetic forms of the old Spanish and Provençal literatures owe nothing of their character to the songs of the Spanish Arabs. Yet Baist says, in comparing an Arabic verse-form with the Spanish *villancico*, "Die Ähnlichkeit ist allerdings frappant, dabei muss aber beachtet werden, dass die gleiche Form sich nicht nur bei der sizilischen Dichterschule sondern auch in den

¹ The order of rimes in the *décima* is abbaaccddc; in the *ballade* it is ababbccdd. The latter is exactly equal to two *quintillas*.

provenzalischen *Dansas* wiederfindet.”¹ If it be not possible to see traces of the Arabic anywhere in Sicily or Provence, this is a remarkable example of independent development along similar lines.

2. Similarity of phrasing, which of course implies community of idea, must be viewed in the light of many modifying circumstances. If I read in a student's thesis a paragraph which startles me by its maturity, and if then upon search I find the passage word for word in a volume of Charles Dudley Warner's *Library of the World's Best Literature*, I do not hesitate to refuse the student credit for his smooth English. The improbability that he could write so well, the accessibility of the book, which is on the shelves of the Union, the exact identity of a long sentence, everything points to mere copying. But that is an exceptionally patent example. Much more often there is room for doubt about the borrowing.

In these days when the degree of Ph. D. sometimes lends itself to the interpretation, “doctor of parallel-hunting,” the possibility of chance coincidence of phrase has been almost excluded. A German critic, Bock, has thus stated his creed: “Under the circumstances,” says he, discussing the possibility that Molière copied an obscure Spanish version of the *Amphitryon* story, “I think it more natural and simpler to assume some relation between the respective passages, than to explain them by chance coincidence, which would be more remarkable and therefore has less claim to probability.”² No doubt, as Bock says, it is *easier* to affirm

¹ Gröber's *Grundriss*, II. Band, 2. Abteilung, p. 385.

² Unter den obwaltenden Umständen, meine ich, ist es natürlicher und einfacher an eine Verwandtschaft der betreffenden Stellen zu denken, als an eine zufällige Uebereinstimmung, was als wunderbarer doch weniger Anspruch auf Wahrscheinlichkeit hat. N. Bock, in *Zts. für neufr. Spr. und Lit.*, vol. x (1888), p. 86.

"He borrowed," especially when one desires to set up a theory more attractive in point of novelty than soundness; but that should not lead us to untenable conclusions. For short phrases Bock's working hypothesis seems to me too radical. It is quite as probable on the face of it that Molière and Fernán Pérez de Oliva should have used like words in treating a subject which both derived from Plautus, as that the Frenchman should have dug phrases from the bookish version of a Spanish pedant.

Resemblances are important directly in proportion to the length of the passage, and to the closeness of parallel in wording. Each case must be decided on its merits. One should ask one's self such questions as these: Is the later author known to have read the earlier? If not, is it likely that his course of reading led in that direction? Was it physically possible for him to know his predecessor's works? was he acquainted with the language? were the books easily accessible? either in the original or through some medium? Is the common nature of the subject such that similarity of phrase might well be expected? Does any striking and unusual word occur in both? The answers to such queries may at least create a presumption for or against the borrowing. Thus one might expect to find reminiscences of Virgil and Horace in an enthusiastic classicist, whilst it would be folly to search for Homeric phrases in a mediæval epic. The middle ground between the two extremes affords plenty of opportunity for the exercise of careful judgment.

3. The same considerations hold in the broader field of ideas, which joins that of mere phraseology without any sharp line of demarcation. From the single conceit, worked out in one line or one stanza, to the elaborate plot of a Don Juan play, handed down from one author to another with trifling changes in detail, the critic, for his own satisfaction, tries to determine what each owes to his predecessors.

In the case of the isolated thought I do not believe it just to throw the burden of proof on the defendant—the writer whose originality is questioned. The odds are at least even that the coincidence is a chance one, until the answers to some of the questions given above have weighted the scales on one side or the other. Striking examples of the “effects of hazard,” to use an old play-title, are not lacking. One, which might equally well have been set in the preceding section, may be found in the tragi-comedy of Jean Rotrou called *Laure persécutée*, Act II, scene 5. The heroine says of herself, after relating the story of her dishonor:—

De ce mortel affront rien ne peut me sauver,
Et la mer n'a pas d'eaux assez pour m'en laver.

Compare these words with those of Leonato to his daughter in the fourth act of *Much Ado about Nothing*, scene 1:—

She is fallen
Into a pit of ink, that the wide sea
Hath drops too few to wash her clean again.

Rotrou's piece dates from 1637, but he certainly knew nothing of Shakespeare.¹ There is no question of reminiscence, conscious or unconscious, on the part of the Frenchman; the figurative exaggeration is such as would suggest itself naturally to the mind of a poet, without need of foreign stimulation.

Another example: Recently a student of German literature noticed certain poems of the minnesingers which he thought resembled some of Goethe's. Upon closer inspection he became convinced that Goethe had really drawn inspiration for both thought and metre from certain of those mediæval lyrics. Thus he had a novel theory well under way, when he learned, in the course of his investigation,

¹ Cf. J. Jarry, *Essai sur les Oeuvres de Jean Rotrou*, Paris, 1868, p. 92. Other comparisons of Rotrou with Shakespeare are there made.

that there was only one collection of minnelieder printed in Goethe's time, and that the particular poems in question were not in it! So the embryo theory was temporarily checked in its growth by a physical impossibility. But the student then set himself to examine the poems which Goethe *could* have seen, and found other resemblances quite as serviceable as the first. He continued his theory upon that basis, and for aught I know it may represent truth. But one may pertinently ask whether the arguments adduced to show Goethe's indebtedness to the poems *in* the collection would not apply equally well to those *not* in it; and, if so, what conviction arguments can bring with them, which have already proved valueless in a specific instance. One is reminded of the conversation which took place between Lavengro and Parkinson the poet:—

Lavengro :—"Mr. Parkinson, you put me *very* much in mind of the Welsh bards."

Parkinson :—"The Welsh what?"

"Bards. Did you never hear of them?"

"Can't say that I ever did."

"You do not understand Welsh?"

"I do not."

"Well, provided you did, I should be strongly disposed to imagine you imitated the Welsh bards. . . . The subjects of hundreds of their compositions are the very subjects which you appear to delight in. . . ."

"I can't help it," said Parkinson, "and I tell you again that I imitate nobody."

It is usually not hard and comparatively safe to trace the course of a complex plot, especially when there appear in it names which serve as ear-marks. The more involved the action, the more unusual and striking the details, with so much greater certainty may one determine the lineage of an outline, the dose of originality injected into it by each re-handler. Take the Don Juan theme, for instance, and the series of plays and poems each one of which owes its being to the Burlador de Sevilla, the fountain-head. The

names Don Juan, Elvira, the moving statue, are links which connect any work of any country with Spanish literature; and by the use of them each and every author acknowledges his indebtedness to the Spaniard who, from whatever sources he drew his material, established in its broad lines a type. That some of his followers greatly modified the type and presented it in more artistic form, there can be no doubt; none of them succeeded in concealing the source of his theme, if indeed any attempted it. So with other stock subjects, Sophonisba, Iphigenia, Amphitryon, ready-made stories, which offer to a writer an opportunity to exercise his skill in workmanship upon a design proved worthy, instead of inventing a plot of uncertain promise.

Not all stories, to be sure, are so distinctly branded by name or incident. There must be, I imagine, a broad and hazy middle ground in the field of folklore, upon which the critic must pick his way with care. Since all men have a common basis of experiences, it is reasonable to suppose that similar stories may arise independently in different quarters of the globe, just as similar events take place, and similar lines are written. Must every anecdote of the fickleness of a bereaved wife be regarded as descending in direct line from the famous Widow of Ephesus? Anthropologists do not believe that the myths of deluges and giants which exist among primitive races everywhere indicate one place of origin for all, or intercommunication between continents; they regard the stories as representative of a certain stage in the development of man's mind, and therefore likely to appear spontaneously anywhere on the globe. And in like manner themes of greater refinement may be only manifestations of more advanced stages of progress in any part of the world.

4. The broadest kind of influence is that of a man's general point of view. Here is no longer a question of

parallel phrases, or conceits, or incidents, but of a whole current of thought which a man or group of men has set in motion. The subject is a vast one and I cannot more than touch upon it. It would include the influence of Plato, of Aristotle, upon the world's thought; it would include the inner history of every literary movement, great or small, as for example the impetus given to French romanticism by the Germans, or Gautier's relation to the realists. To determine the extent of power wielded in each case would demand extraordinary breadth of knowledge.

For we are not here dealing merely with an external force acting upon an inert body. One must determine the natural bent of the one acted upon. It is not impossible that a thinking man might independently arrive at the same conclusions as Plato concerning duty, or adopt of his own motion an analytical method like Aristotle's. The romantic tendency in a man might be as much the product of his own temperament as of the example and writings of a group of persons with whom he came in contact. In short, the critic must try to settle, by all the means at his disposal, the hard problem, whether a writer is carried away by a current of ideas, or whether he is himself a moving force in the same direction. Probably something of each enters into most cases.

PART TWO.

I pass now to the second main division of my subject, which treats of questions of disputed authorship. Such cases are not exceedingly common in the history of literature, but they are interesting when they do occur, because they affect directly our notions about the literary characters involved. The personality of an author might appear much modified if the disputed work were definitely assigned to him.

And, before going farther, it should be noted that we obtain our chief impression of a dead author from his own writings. A few men have their Boswells to transmit to posterity their idiosyncracies in a hundred characteristic anecdotes, but most often the ultimate mirror of a writer's character is the product of his pen. The living people with whom we are acquainted impress us with their personality not only by what they say, but by their appearance, their voices, their gestures, their acts. From a multitude of details we form an idea which we may afterward apply as a test of authenticity to printed words. Such a criterion is more accurate than any which can be compiled from the records of the past. Yet even with such an aid, can one bind one's self to select unerringly an article by his friend James Smith from among a dozen others? Has not everyone experienced that feeling of surprise which comes from seeing the name of some acquaintance at the bottom of an article of unexpected merit, and has he not exclaimed "I never thought Smith was capable of writing that?" If we are thus fallible with respect to persons known to us, are we not much more so when dealing with authors whose acts are veiled behind the interpretation of biographers, and whose only means of direct appeal is through printed pages which may represent only a small per cent. of their real activity? The probability that some sides of their natures are hidden from us makes it possible that some one phase, otherwise unknown, may have been expressed in a work dissimilar from the rest. A genius has always some unexplored recesses of his personality. It is dangerous to say with assurance, Such a man could not have written this. No doubt many a critic would have been ready to affirm that the abbé Prévost could not have written *Manon Lescaut*, if he had not firmly attached his name to the book. And who, knowing Anatole France only through the wholesome

charm of *le Crime de Sylvestre Bonnard*, would ever guess him capable of the sticky sensuality revealed in *la Rôtisserie de la Reine Pédauque*?

On the other hand, I am not sure that it is not equally dangerous to use the opposite formula and say: "No one but such a man can have written this." The expression is a familiar one. "Who but Mendoza can have written *Lazarillo de Tormes*?" is a question which was long considered final. "Who but Cervantes can have written *la Tia fingida*?"—the argument is still thought valid. Perhaps these stories really are the work of those famous men, but they may also be single gems of some obscure artist, spurred on by personal experience or by the example of his betters to put all his talent into one supreme achievement. So it was with Fernando de Rojas, of whom not a line is known outside his master-piece, the *Celestina*, and the prologues which accompany it.

Returning now to the main matter, I will state again, what I do not think anyone will gainsay, that style is an absolute criterion of authorship. If it is only by a striking coincidence that two men write a phrase in the same words, it is inconceivable that they should frame a page of thought in identical language. Even if the subject were assigned and carefully laid out in divisions by a third party, no two men could express it alike. John La Farge tells an incident which illustrates the fact in the realm of painting, and it would be just as true in literature. He went out with two friends, he says, to sketch a landscape, each one intending to make as nearly as possible a mere photographic reproduction of what lay before his eyes. And yet, when the sketches were done, no two were alike. "Two were oblong, but of different proportions; one was more nearly a square. In each picture the distance bore a different relation to the foreground. In each picture the clouds were treated with

different precision and different attention. In one picture the open sky was the main intention of the picture. In two pictures the upper sky was of no consequence—it was the clouds and mountains that were insisted upon. . . . The color of each painting was different—the vivacity of colors and tone, the distinctness of each part in relation to the whole; and each picture would have been recognized anywhere as a specimen of work by each one of us, characteristic of our names.”

Prof. Van Dyke, who quotes the above story in illustration of the individuality of style which painters cannot avoid,¹ goes on to comment upon the ease with which an observer can from a distance pick out familiar hands in a strange gallery,—tell at a glance a Corot, a Titian, or a Holbein. And as to literature, he says: “Suppose you should have read to you extracts from a hundred famous authors, do you think you would have much difficulty in recognizing Shakespeare from Victor Hugo, Carlyle from Cardinal Newman, or Walter Scott from Swinburne?” No doubt we could distinguish between the pairs he mentions, but he has picked out as examples figures among the most prominent in literature, whose mode of expression is characteristic even to mannerism. A novice in art can detect a painting in the style of Botticelli or Rubens as far as he can see it, and a single word might sometimes suffice to identify Carlyle, but the problem is not always so easy as that. When it comes to fixing the assignment of a picture to Rubens or one of his pupils, the best critics may disagree, and the most microscopic study of the brush-strokes hardly bring a solution. Giorgione and Titian were painters of very unlike temperament, yet to-day nobody knows which one of them painted the famous work in the Pitti gallery,

¹ J. C. Van Dyke, *The Meaning of Pictures*, N. Y., 1903, p. 35, note.

entitled *The Concert*. The European galleries are full of paintings of uncertain authenticity, and many an art-critic has established a reputation by reversing the judgment of centuries on the strength of the painting of a finger.

In the field of literature there is not so much uncertainty, but the principle is the same. It is true I have heard the statement made that one should be able to fix the date of a piece of writing within ten years, by style alone. I do not remember that the gentleman who made the statement offered to perform the feat himself in all cases with absolute accuracy, though he is undoubtedly as well equipped for it as anyone. That would mean that he must not only distinguish between writers, but he must differentiate the styles of the same man at different ages. Could he tell a letter of Voltaire's written in 1750 from one dated 1760, apart from their matter? I should incline to doubt it.

But that would be a self-imposed task of unnecessary difficulty, and really outside the subject. If it is possible always to detect a writer's individuality through his words that is quite enough. Unquestionably this is often possible. If Rudyard Kipling and Swinburne were both to describe a white billiard ball, it would probably be easy to fit each set of words with the right author; and the broader the scope afforded by the subject the greater would be the divergence. It would be as impossible for the two versions to be just alike in phrase as it would be impossible that a tracing of Mr. La Farge's sketch, laid upon his friend's, should coincide with it, line for line, throughout. But sometimes the choice lies, not between two, but among many; and the candidates may not be as unlike in temperament as Kipling and Swinburne. Then it is that style becomes a standard as dubious as the critics who interpret it are various in their ideas; the fault, however, lies not in the standard, which is infallible, but in the knowledge of the critics, which is

incomplete. So in newspaper articles evidences of individuality are either non-existent or imperceptible. Students of literature seldom have to consider the work of reporters, but sometimes the problem before them is no less great.

In periods of production in which the spirit of the times casts into the shade individual differences, periods like those of the Provençal lyric or the Spanish drama of the *siglo de oro*, there is a great deal of confusion as to authors. Look over a catalogue of Spanish plays from 1600 to 1650, and see the number of titles followed by a mark of interrogation. Many of them are of insignificant value, and not worth controversy, but others are among the most brilliant dramas of the age. From a list which includes the *Burlador de Sevilla* itself one may select as the most noteworthy example *el Condenado por desconfiado*, a play usually assigned to the friar Téllez. Without going into details in the matter, it may be said that there are no certain data which confirm his authorship. Menéndez y Pelayo, while admitting that the style is not like Téllez's, thinks the play his because only a friar knew enough theology to conceive the fine scholastic distinctions upon which its plot is based. Menéndez Pidal accepts Téllez as the author without discussion. So weighty an authority as Baist, however, declares the play certainly not Téllez's.¹ Unless some bit of evidence now hidden comes to light, the matter will probably never be settled to the satisfaction of all, and yet the play is anything but commonplace. The plot is unusual and fraught with meaning, the versification careful and varied, the characters subtle, the feeling profound; it was written, I feel sure, by one hand alone, and that a master's. Who was he? Who can so subtly divine the characters of all the dramatists of that day as to solve the riddle?

¹ Gröber's *Grundriss*, II. Band, 2. Abteilung, p. 465.

Another interesting case is offered us in the recent controversy concerning *le Paradoxe sur le comédien*. A dialogue always ascribed to Diderot, and even thought one of his most characteristic performances, it was suddenly taken from him by a French critic and assigned to a relatively obscure publicist named Naigeon, on the strength of a new manuscript in the latter's handwriting. Some defend Diderot's claim, others declare it had always seemed suspicious to them. Finally comes a critic, more painstaking and more perspicuous than the rest, who restores the dialogue to Diderot with some appearance of definitiveness; basing his argument on what may be termed purely mechanical grounds, quite apart from any question of style.¹ If style furnishes a safe guide to authorship, the question ought to have been settled beyond a doubt on that basis. Does anyone believe that both Diderot and Naigeon were capable of writing *le Paradoxe sur le comédien*? Surely not; the difficulty lay with the critics, who were not possessed of data enough or delicacy of perception sufficient to detect the personality behind the work.

It is not that the personality is a weak one. Dante certainly possessed an individuality as powerful as any in the annals of literature; unique, striking, which seemingly left its impress upon everything which it touched. It is not that the personality succeeds but weakly in making itself felt through its medium of communication. Dante was one of the greatest of all masters of language, moulding it to his thought with marvellous skill. Yet no critic will affirm with absolute certainty that he did or did not write *il Fiore*, and there are numerous sonnets and *ballate* published with his works, the genuineness of which is in dispute. The fact is that style alone, however infallible in theory, can never

¹ See *Mod. Lang. Notes*, March-April, 1904, p. 97.

be accepted as proof positive by the common run of men. The critics competent to pass on such a matter must be few in number, for they must have imbued themselves to the marrow with the spirit of their author by long and intimate association. Perhaps a single man, thus equipped, may have settled the question in his own mind; he may see in a writing evidences of a man's handiwork which convince him utterly; and he may be right; but he can never convince the world of scholars, because the world demands evidence more ponderable than a turn of speech, more tangible than a favorite subtlety of thought.

CONCLUSION.

The conclusions to be drawn from the foregoing considerations are, I think, chiefly three.

1. The fact that the same phrase appears in authors having no special connection is not sufficient proof that one copied from another.

2. In judging matters of interinfluence and authorship, the most mechanical evidence is the most weighty; wording is less subject to wrong interpretation than idea, and tangible extrinsic facts are to be preferred to arguments based on spirit or style.

3. There is always reason to distrust an individual opinion on a question involving an author's personality. The critic's own bias inevitably sways the balance. Hence problems which depend for their solution on subjective evidence can never be considered definitely settled.

I have not even considered the matter, entirely distinct, of plagiarism in relation to an author's merit. I doubt if there are many writers in the history of literature whose reputations have suffered extensively from the borrowings

with which they are charged. Neither are there many works of real importance which are still at large without known sponsors. That is the same as saying that the matters under discussion are merely themes for academic curiosity, without much practical import. Yet they afford the student an excellent opportunity for the exercise of care, acute perception, and sound judgment.

S. GRISWOLD MORLEY.